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In re Patent No. 6,000,658
Issue Date: 12/14/1999
Application Number: 09/059994
Filing Date: 04/13/1998
For: AN IMPROVED TOILET PAPER
DISPENSER

: DECISION ON PETITION

This is a decision on the petition filed on October 5, 2010, under 37 CFR § 1.378(b) to accept the delayed payment of a maintenance fee for the above-identified patent.

The petition is dismissed.

If reconsideration of this decision is desired, a petition for reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(e) must be filed within TWO (2) MONTHS from the mail date of this decision. No extension of this 2-month time limit can be granted under 37 CFR 1.136(a) or (b). Any such petition for reconsideration must be accompanied by the petition fee of \$400.00 as set forth in 37 CFR 1.17(f). The petition for reconsideration should include an exhaustive attempt to provide the lacking item(s) noted below, since, after a decision on the petition for reconsideration, no further reconsideration or review of the matter will be undertaken by the Director.

The patent issued December 14, 1999. The first maintenance fee was timely paid. The second maintenance fee could have been paid from December 14, 2006 through June 14, 2007, or, with a surcharge during the period from June 15, 2007 through December 14, 2007. Accordingly, the patent expired at midnight on December 14, 2007, for failure to timely submit the maintenance fee.

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Petitioner, *pro se*, asserts that payment of the maintenance fee was unavoidably delayed due to financial hardship. In pertinent part, petitioner, Tommie McCall, Jr., has been laid-off from his job since October 28, 2007. In support, petitioner has provided copies of tax returns for 2007, 2008, and 2009, as well as documentation of receipt of unemployment benefits, as well as a letter from his mortgage lender acknowledging petitioner had contacted the lender for assistance in dealing with a financial hardship.

A petition to accept the delayed maintenance fee under 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b) must be accompanied by (1) an adequate, verified showing that the delay was unavoidable, since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent, (2) payment of the appropriate maintenance fee, unless previously submitted, and (3) payment of the surcharge set forth in 37 CFR 1.20(i)(1).

This petition lacks requirement (1).

The Director may accept late payment of the maintenance fee if the delay is shown to the satisfaction of the Director to have been "unavoidable".¹

The showing of record is inadequate to establish unavoidable delay within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3).

A late maintenance fee is considered under the same standard as that for reviving an abandoned application under 35 U.S.C. § 133 because 35 U.S.C. § 41(c)(1) uses identical language (i.e. "unavoidable delay").² Decisions reviving abandoned applications have adopted the reasonably prudent person standard in determining if the delay was unavoidable.³ In this regard:

The word 'unavoidable' . . . is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most

¹ 35 U.S.C. § 41(c)(1).

² Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 608-09, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1787 (Fed. Cir. 1995) (quoting In re Patent No. 4,409,763, 7 USPQ2d 1798, 1800 (Comm'r Pat. 1989)).

³ Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (Comm'r Pat. 1887) (the term "unavoidable" "is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business").

important business. It permits them in the exercise of this care to rely upon the ordinary and trustworthy agencies of mail and telegraph, worthy and reliable employees, and such other means and instrumentalities as are usually employed in such important business. If unexpectedly, or through the unforeseen fault or imperfection of these agencies and instrumentalities, there occurs a failure, it may properly be said to be unavoidable, all other conditions of promptness in its rectification being present.⁴

A patent owner's failure to pay a maintenance fee may be considered to have been "unavoidable" if the patent owner "exercised the due care of a reasonably prudent person."⁵ This determination is to be made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account."⁶ Unavoidable delay under 35 U.S.C. § 41(b) is measured by the same standard as that for reviving an abandoned application under 35 U.S.C. § 133.⁷ Under 35 U.S.C. § 133, the Director may revive an abandoned application if the delay in responding to the relevant outstanding Office requirement is shown to the satisfaction of the Director to have been "unavoidable". Decisions on reviving abandoned applications have adopted the reasonably prudent person standard in determining if the delay was unavoidable.⁸ However, a petition to revive an application as unavoidably abandoned cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing the cause of the unavoidable delay.⁹ In view of In re Patent No. 4,409,763, this same standard will be applied to determine whether "unavoidable" delay within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b) occurred.

⁴ In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-15 (1912) (quoting Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (1887)); see also Winkler v. Ladd, 221 F. Supp. 550, 552, 138 USPQ 666, 167-68 (D.D.C. 1963), aff'd, 143 USPQ 172 (D.C. Cir. 1963); Ex parte Henrich, 1913 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 139, 141 (1913). In addition, decisions on revival are made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account." Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). Finally, a petition cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing that the delay was "unavoidable." Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 316-17, 5 USPQ2d 1130, 1131-32 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

⁵ Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 608-09 (Fed.Cir.), cert. denied, -- U.S. ---, 116 S.Ct. 304, L.Ed.2d 209 (1995).

⁶ Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982).

⁷ In re Patent No. 4,409,763, 7 USPQ2d 1798, 1800 (PTO Comm'r 1988).

⁸ Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (Comm'r Pat. 1887) (the term "unavoidable" "is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business"); In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-15 (D.C. Cir. 1912); Ex parte Henrich, 1913 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 139, 141 (Comm'r Pat. 1913).

⁹ Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 5 USPQ2d 1130 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

This petition does not satisfy the requirement of 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3). The statements presented in the petition fail to satisfy the showing required to establish unavoidable delay within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b).

As 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) requires the payment of fees at specified intervals to maintain a patent in force, rather than some response to a specific action by the Office under 35 U.S.C. § 133, a reasonably prudent person in the exercise of due care and diligence would have taken steps to ensure the timely payment of such maintenance fees.¹⁰ That is, an adequate showing that the delay was "unavoidable" within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) requires a showing of the steps taken to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fees for this patent.¹¹

Petitioner has not presented a sufficient showing of unavoidable delay resulting from financial hardship. A complete showing is required of petitioner's, or the party responsible for payment of the maintenance fee's, financial condition including all income, expense, assets, credit, and obligations which made the delay from December 14, 2007, the date the maintenance fee was due, until the filing of a grantable petition, unavoidable. Petitioner must provide verified copies of any available documents or records (e.g., copies of all bank statements and other documents as detailed below) covering the entire period between December 14, 2007, and the filing of a grantable petition, including the maintenance fee payment.

In this regard, while it is noted petitioner has supplied tax returns showing his income, petitioner must fully document his financial position by providing a statement of his assets, liabilities, and expenses. In summary, petitioner must explain what assets are owned, as well as how much money is owed to creditors and what expenses petitioner has been incurring from the date the maintenance fee was due, December 14, 2007, until the date of the filing of a grantable petition.

Petitioner may provide this documented showing by supplying copies of mortgage documents showing the monthly mortgage payment as well as the balance due, documentation of other loan payments (i.e., vehicle loans or credit card statements), other expenses (i.e., utilities, food, and clothing), as well as a statement of

¹⁰ Ray, 55 F.3d at 609, 34 USPQ2d at 1788.

¹¹ Id.

all assets owned by petitioner (e.g., petitioner's home, vehicles, investments, bank accounts, and personal property).

Any renewed petition must be explained by a thoroughly documented showing as listed above.

Likewise, petitioner should explain whether he had sufficient credit available to charge the maintenance fee during the period when it could have been timely paid. Petitioner should also explain whether any other sources of income, such as loans or gifts, were available that could have been used to timely pay the maintenance fee.

Further, in this regard, as petitioner's wife was employed, and petitioner was receiving unemployment benefits, during the time between the date the maintenance fee was due and the filing of the subject petition, petitioner must explain why the maintenance fee could not have been more timely paid using these sources of funds.

In this regard, a showing of diligence in matters before the USPTO is essential to support a finding of unavoidable delay herein.¹² There is no "sliding scale" based upon the priority given to this maintaining this patent in force, or more diligently seeking reinstatement, vis-a-vis other matters by petitioner; the issue is solely whether the maintenance, or reinstatement, of the patent at issue was actually conducted with the care or diligence that is generally used and observed by prudent and careful persons in relation to their most important business. The delay was not unavoidable, because had petitioner exercised the due care and diligence of a reasonably prudent person, petitioner would have been able to act to pay the fee or seek reinstatement in a timely fashion. The record fails to adequately evidence that petitioner exercised the due care and diligence observed by prudent and careful persons, in relation to their most important business, which is necessary to establish unavoidable delay.¹³

¹² See Futures Technology, Ltd. v. Quigg, 684 F. Supp. 430, 431, 7 USPQ2d 1588 (E.D. Va. 1988) (applicant's diligent inquiry into the status of the application is required to show unavoidable delay); Douglas v. Manbeck, 21 USPQ2d 1697, 1699-1700 (E.D. Pa. 1991), aff'd, 975 F.2d 869, 24 USPQ2d 1318 (Fed. Cir. 1992) (even representation by counsel does not relieve the applicant from his obligation to exercise diligence before the USPTO; applicant's lack of diligence extending two and one half years overcame and superseded any omissions by his counsel).

¹³ Pratt, supra.

In summary, while the Office is mindful of petitioner's predicament, the showing of record does not rise to the level of unavoidable delay. Accordingly, the petition must be dismissed.

Petitioner is cautioned to avoid submitting personal information in a patent application that may contribute to identity theft. If personal information such as social security numbers, bank account numbers, or credit card numbers are included in documents submitted to the USPTO (other than a check or credit card authorization form PTO-2038 submitted for payment purposes), petitioners should consider redacting such personal information from the documents before submitting them to the USPTO. This type of personal information is never required by the USPTO to support a petition or an application. Petitioner is advised that any information submitted in an application is available to the public after publication of the application (unless a non-publication request in compliance with 37 CFR 1.213(a) is made in the application) or issuance of a patent. Furthermore, information from an abandoned application may also be available to the public if the application is referenced in a published application or an issued patent (see 37 CFR 1.14). Checks and credit card authorization forms PTO-2038 submitted for payment purposes are not retained in the application file and therefore are not publicly available.

Petitioner should note that if this petition is not renewed, or if renewed and not granted, then the maintenance fee and post-expiration surcharge are refundable. The \$400.00 petition fee for seeking reconsideration is not refundable. Any request for refund should be in writing to the address noted below.

Further correspondence with respect to this matter should be addressed as follows:

By mail: Mail Stop Petition
Commissioner for Patents
P.O. Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

By FAX: (571) 273-8300
Attn: Office of Petitions

By hand: Customer Service Window
Mail Stop Petition
Randolph Building
401 Dulany Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

The address in the petition is different than the correspondence address. A courtesy copy of this decision will be mailed to the address in the petition. All future correspondence, however, will be mailed solely to the address of record. A change of correspondence address should be filed if the correspondence address needs to be updated.

Telephone inquiries should be directed to the undersigned at 571-272-3231.



Douglas I. Wood
Senior Petitions Attorney
Office of Petitions

Encl: Change of Correspondence Address--Patent

Cc:

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